

Legislature did not fully fund high-quality education system

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Lawmakers has one spending mandate from the people (limiting K-12 class sizes), and yet they put it at the back of the line.

By [Kim Mead](#)

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WASHINGTON Education Association members are dedicated to providing our students the quality education they deserve. As educators, that's our duty.

The state constitution says amply funding basic education is the Legislature's duty.

Unfortunately for our kids, Washington legislators haven't fulfilled their duty for years, and the state Supreme Court is holding them in contempt as a result. That is unlikely to change under the new state budget, which increases funding for school materials and supplies, but falls far short in two key areas of basic education: class sizes and educator pay.

As educators, we believe our children deserve a fully funded, high-quality education today, not some day in the distant future. Regardless of their ZIP code, Washington children deserve schools with small class sizes that provide personal, one-on-one support from committed, qualified teachers and support professionals.

Voters agree.

Last November, they approved Initiative 1351, amending the definition of basic education to include smaller class sizes in every grade level. It was the second time Washington voters passed an initiative to reduce overcrowded class sizes.

Yet from the governor on down, lawmakers in Olympia tried to avoid discussing I-1351, let alone funding it. The Legislature voted to delay implementation of I-1351 by four additional years — not starting until 2019. That means most of our children, those in

grades 4-12, will continue to be packed into some of the most overcrowded classrooms in the country.

Many legislators say funding smaller class sizes for all children is too expensive. But they found a way to approve \$12 billion in new taxes for roads. Transportation improvements are needed, but transportation is not the state's paramount duty.

State Sen. Cyrus Habib, D-Kirkland, said it well: "We only had one spending mandate from the people (reducing K-12 class sizes), and yet we put it at the back of the line — we put it after all the other things we wanted to do. To me the will of the people ought to come first."

Lawmakers could have approved new revenue sources for education: a capital-gains tax on the wealthiest Washingtonians or a tax on corporate polluters. These ideas could have improved the fairness of our tax system and provided money to fully fund smaller classes and other needs.

The Supreme Court also ordered the Legislature to make significant progress in providing competitive, professional wages for educators. The court said, "Nothing is more basic than adequate pay."

Here's how legislators interpreted that: They funded an 11 percent raise for themselves. They provided a much-deserved 4.8 percent cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) for state employees. For educators? A 3 percent COLA (required by existing law) and a temporary 1.8 percent bump that disappears in 2017. And that's after going six years with no state COLA. As a result, educator salaries in Washington are about 13 percent behind where they would be if the COLA had been funded, even after accounting for any locally negotiated pay increases. According to the Legislature's research, in nearly every category, K-12 school employees earn less than our counterparts in comparable professions that require similar experience and education.

Legislators also increased health-care support nearly \$200 a month for themselves and state employees. That's compared to \$12 a month for teachers, after five years with no

increase. As a result, thousands of educators will take home less pay next year, making it more difficult to keep qualified educators for our kids.

Senate budget writer Andy Hill and other legislators claim they have fully funded K-12 education, but teachers and support professionals know the truth. Until the Legislature invests in smaller class sizes at every grade level, and in professional pay and benefits for school employees, the state is not meeting its paramount duty to our children.

This debate isn't about budget figures, politics or legal argument, it's about our collective duty to our children. It's about investing in our kids' education and their success. That's what WEA members want; it's what everyone wants.

And it's what matters most.

Kim Mead is a teacher and president of the 85,000-member Washington Education Association, which has advocated for quality public schools since 1889.